

# Sociological islands: An appraisal of connection-making practices in research reporting

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## Introduction

Historically, writings on the methodology of the social sciences have been predominantly normative and abstract rather than descriptive and concrete, being concerned to spell out general ways of proceeding which are thought to be appropriate to the social sciences, however the latter's constitutive affinities to the natural sciences or humanities might have been conceived, rather than focusing on the detailed description of research practices by social scientists. Although this tendency is understandable given the distance between what social sciences like sociology promise to accomplish and what they actually have to show for it, there is much that studies of the latter kind can offer both as an end in themselves as well as in connection to normative methodological work.

Conceived as ways of exhibiting rather than evaluating members' methods for the orderly production of sociological work, ethnomethodological studies, such as the one conducted by Anderson and Sharrock (1982), have pioneered descriptions of sociological practices and continue to do so as Greiffenhagen et al.'s observational study (2015) does in its detailing methodological troubles social scientists encounter in the course of conducting research. Moreover, current ethnomethodological work can situate itself within a field of (at least partly) likeminded studies which Greiffenhagen et al. identify as operating under a 'growing interest in practices and techniques of knowledge making in social and cultural life more broadly' and as exhibiting a 'dissatisfaction with programmatic doctrinal statements of the aims of the social sciences wedded to meta-reflection, critique and inter- and intra-disciplinary jostling and one-upmanship. Rather than using idealised conceptions of social science as decontextualised standards to judge what social scientists do, the focus has been on understanding the scale, range and diversity of the social sciences practical entanglements in social and cultural life...' (2015: 461).

The development sketched in the above passage is rather curious, however, as the methodological problems that have so bedevilled the social sciences since their inception seem to no longer be the issue, having perhaps been set aside in the double shift from failed ideal or decontextualised conceptions to the practical detail and from a normative to a descriptive orientation. It is worth observing regarding these pairs that while they may have coincided in past methodological work, for example, in work that drew normative conceptions from the philosophy of science, they evidently need not do so, at

least not as a matter of logic. For one, articulations of methodological ideals can be held accountable to the detail of actual practices in the sense that they need to show that they accurately identify lacunae and offer improvements geared to what is actually problematic in the latter. Moreover, there can be a normative orientation which can arise from an appraisal of the details of social scientific practice. Thus, since the methodological issues the social sciences have faced throughout their history of crises<sup>1</sup> have anything but gone away and the state of sociology continues to be problematic, perhaps a normative orientation coupled with close attention to the details of sociological practice can offer something new to understanding what the problematic aspects of sociological practice exactly are and how they might be changed for the better.

In the present article I will provide an example of what a study based on this concrete-normative combination can offer.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, I will scrutinise sociological research featured in a highly esteemed general sociology journal and focus on ways in which the reported research is embedded in a network of connections both to other academic work as well to the social world at large. I will present a case to the effect that connection-making practices are problematic, typically comprising as they do gestures toward implied or token connections or contrasts rather than well-supported and carefully articulated ones, thus resulting in studies which, although presented as if they were part of a continuous expanse of land, are in fact insular. The actual insularity of sociological research is not only detrimental to the research itself, but is also largely responsible for perpetuating disciplinary dysfunction and incoherence.

Before providing a description of the materials I will utilise as well as a brief rationale for their choice, I should like to stress a subtle point. In looking at journal articles I do not consider myself to be taking the finished piece of work as a proxy for research practice; in other words, I am not using a ‘textual-archival trace’ left behind by an investigation (Greiffenhagen et al. 2015: 3) in order to reconstruct what and how it transpired. As Anderson and Sharrock pointed out already in 1982 with reference to the distinction discussed by Kaplan (1973) between ‘reconstructed logic’ and ‘logic-in-use’ it ‘is an interesting if somewhat misleading one ... since it directs attention away from the practical aspects of giving research reports. The “reconstructed logic” of the research report is the practically oriented “logic-in-use” for the presenting of such reports. The formalisation of the “reconstructed logic” is just another “logic-in-use” which is displayed in the ways that the report is put together.’ Thus, instead of treating the work of reporting research as a covering-up job whose scrutiny will reveal what has been concealed during the actual doing of research, I am treating it as a practice in its own right. In what follows I will

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<sup>1</sup> See for example: Gouldner (1970), Davis (1994), Mouzelis (1995), Weinstein (1997), Savage and Burrows (2007), Hollands and Stanley (2009), Manza et al. (2010).

<sup>2</sup> In response to one anonymous reviewer I should emphasise that in opting for this combination I am departing from ethnomethodological inquiry and its central policies, e.g. ethnomethodological indifference.

be scrutinising those aspects of research reporting practices<sup>3</sup> that have to do with establishing a set of relevancies for the conducted research, referring those aspects back to broad standards of scholarship.

### The chosen materials

The rationale behind the choice of materials is to investigate contemporary research practices which as much as possible evince common understandings of what sociological research is like. Given these criteria the choice of textbooks has been ruled out as the latter do not typically discuss contemporary research and further, given the fact that they address an audience of newcomers and novices, they provide a very specific picture of the discipline (see Lynch & Bogen 1997) that professional sociologists need not reproduce amongst themselves. Monographs, although they do perform on the latter task, have also been ruled out due to the volume of materials analysing more than a few of them would generate. On the other hand, academic journals are a venue where professional sociologists address each other, featured articles are tractable in terms of their length and a sufficient breadth of them can be investigated. Most significantly, the journal article is the contemporary vehicle *par excellence* for reporting research.

I have chosen to look at *Sociology*, which is the flagship journal of the British Sociological Association and viewed as one of the most prestigious journals for a sociologist working in Britain to publish their work in. It features what is considered high-quality sociological work expressing general contemporary orientations of the sociological community, this being also reflected in its latest impact factor calculated as the ratio of articles published in 2013 and 2014 over the number of times they were cited in 2015, yielding the number 2.165, one of the highest values for a sociology journal.<sup>4</sup>

For the present study I have selected a recent issue of the journal, the one published in January 2016, comprising twelve original pieces. In the appendix to this article I have provided an overview of the featured work in the form of summaries written by myself. They can be consulted in conjunction with the methodological appraisal that follows. In contrast to the latter, in giving summaries of the selected journal articles I have refrained from any implicit critique and have instead attempted to portray their content and claims in an eminently reasonable light. Naturally, the summaries can and ought to be compared to the articles themselves and the abstracts put together by the authors. Final-

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<sup>3</sup> In presenting a relatively comprehensive bibliography within social studies of social science, Mair et al. also identify axes distinguishing between different types of studies according to whether they are concerned with ‘data collection, analysis and “writing up” in all their complexities undertaken either through a process of reflection on first-hand experience, through studies of the artefacts social scientists work with and produce, or by following researchers themselves to find out what doing research involves’ (2013: 6).

<sup>4</sup> Journal Citation Reports® (Thomson Reuters 2016): <https://jcr.incites.thomsonreuters.com/>

ly, I believe that they also possess value in themselves in allowing a broad yet somewhat detailed overview of what goes on in a mainstream sociology journal.

## Discussion

In this section I will confine myself to some examples of a handful of ways in which authors position the research reported in journal articles within a network of various kinds of connections both to previous academic work and to the world outside the academy. The connection-making practices I will look at seldom establish any strong connection and I will proceed to show how and why this is a fundamental problem.

Most predominant when it comes to reporting research is its positioning with the use of *contrastive formulations*, that is the framing of what was done in contrast to something else, be that previous sociological work or views expressed by the public, government or media. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine how the majority of sociological points could be made without being formulated in this way. Contrasts furnish sociological work with a point, typically in improving on or criticising previous research and correcting or exposing responses to social issues. In so far as the antithetical role accorded to a piece of research is paramount regarding the case being made for its point or contribution, it stands to reason that the antithetical relation would need to be firmly established.

Instead, in the articles examined, the development and careful handling of the relationship between the work conducted and what it is contrasted to is often missing. One finds, that is, *token contrasts* which are made with the intention of anchoring the research in sociological literature or contemporary affairs but which are not elaborated or supported to anything resembling the extent sufficient to warrant the argument being put forth. First, let us consider a case where the contrast is made to what is outside the academy:

In **Article 8** we read: ‘The findings support the view that associations made between low levels of education, poverty and poor parenting are ideologically driven rather than based on empirical evidence ... the results are at odds with commonplace popular, media and political discourses ... these findings can help to refute the dominant discourse with quantitative evidence’ (Dermott and Pomati 2016: 138). Leaving aside the issue of using such evidence in order to refute discourses which have non-empirical bases in certain conceptions about the (im)morality of poverty, this statement has a tenuous relationship to what was in fact examined in the article, which was a lack of association in the particular data selected by the researchers (the 2012 UK Poverty and Social Exclusion survey), and an even more tenuous relation to its point of contrast. Firstly, there is only diffuse mention of who those who make such associations are, what the putative allegations consist in and no consideration of the options regarding what they might be based on. In the case of political discourses some of that basis is conceivably data which may or may not be the same data the researchers have selected, though this is left unspecified. Moreover, the authors have elected to measure only the frequency of parenting practices which they inclusively describe (e.g. ‘talking about homework’) and not to take part in

any discussion of *how* parents engage with their children which is the most obvious basis for any claim to poor parenting. This fact is acknowledged in the conclusion of the article but rather than being perceived as a challenge to the way the authors have presented their argument it is left as a matter for future work: ‘The task for parenting research should not only be to examine relationships between resources and practices but also to question what is being measured and how this impacts on how we think about personal relationships. A richer way to speak of parenting would ... acknowledge the significance of intimacy, emotionality and reciprocity’ (Dermott and Pomati 2016: 139). These are precisely the points that the research would need to establish in order to stand in actual as opposed to token opposition to any claim that the poor are poor parents. Let us now turn to two cases of contrasts to previous sociological work:

The point made in **Article 6** can be loosely paraphrased thus: Do not think of alcohol and friendship epidemiologically, i.e., along a pattern of contagious drinking levels amongst friends; think of alcohol as a means for doing ‘being friends’. What is far from clear in the stated contrast is that what is presented is indeed an alternative understanding to the epidemiological models; rather it would seem that the reported research answers the different question of why drinking patterns might appear ‘contagious’. Of course, nothing analogous to a pathogen is being transmitted, but this does not take away the usefulness of the models, in which ‘contagion’ can have a model-specific mathematical-statistical understanding devoid of biological or medical assumptions. In fairness, however, when it comes to a policy intervention which is one of the points discussed in the article, the contagion model might conceivably imply breaking up friendships or convincing one person to moderate their alcohol consumption (which will then spread to their friends) whereas the understanding offered of alcohol as a means to friendship might have very different implications. But the ‘might’ here is the key word as none of this is specified.

The import of **Article 3** according to Bagguley and Hussain is that it constitutes an improvement upon offered explanations of University attendance increase and that the changes it depicts are indicative of wider significant and complex changes in gender and class relations within, for example, British-Bangladeshi and British-Pakistani communities. The article presents reasoning by young British-Asian women exhibiting how they handle expectations and norms regarding their education and life choices. The authors claim to be offering an improvement compared to what they see as deficiencies in sociological explanations of changes in educational achievement in terms of social capital. While those deficiencies may or may not be there, the picture the study in question portrays does not lead to any explanation of the increase in University attendance. It does not show that challenges to or, alternatively, the acceptance of the norms tied to attending University have respectively decreased or increased. The study can only shed light on the details of how the decision is made and on the challenges (defined as meta-reflexivity) and compromises (defined as communicative-reflexivity) occurring in that process.

In both of the above cases, we are dealing with a contrast of purposes rather than one of findings based on stable research aims. Unsurprisingly, in spite of the alleged close connection the result is lack of coordination and the side-stepping of focused discussion.

Despite the usual absence of a common framework between contrasted studies, in presenting what was done as related to previous sociological work, there is frequent gesturing towards an *implied corpus* of work or knowledge which is being supplemented, enriched or kept up to date. For example, it can be claimed that previous research has looked at a topic in a particular country but has not looked at a certain other country, or that it has done so by making use of qualitative methods but has not done so quantitatively. Once again, the relation to an implied corpus has more to do with a token positioning of the article as legitimate work rather than with the actual existence of any such corpus of knowledge or with concerted work towards a specific direction for which there is in place an operating division of labour.

One instance of this is **Article 7**. It gestures towards a corpus of studies regarding breadwinning which are becoming obsolete and which have neglected to look at Norway. The article then, it is said, is filling in a lack in the corpus in answering a previous researcher's call for 'more in-depth qualitative studies into what it means to bread win' (Nadim 2016: 113).

The idea of a corpus is further sustained by the idea of the *documentation* of the social world, that is, of facts being admitted to the corpus of what is known via the use of sociological methods. Further, the idea of documentation itself presupposes an automatic *knowledge break* between what is commonly understood and what is sociologically known, which allows even uncontroversial observations to become candidates for demonstration. Thus, rather than potentially novel facts being established, known facts can be used as illustrations (cf. Tsilipakos 2015: 146) and/or presented as findings produced by the application of sociological methods.

In **Article 1** Klein claims to be confirming the hypothesis of a declining relationship between measured variables of having a *University degree* and *occupational prestige*. The decline corresponds to a smaller percentage of graduates (whose total number has significantly increased over a period of educational expansion) going into prestigious professions. Here, picking a well-understood fact for admission into the corpus of knowledge provides a solution for the problem of locating some kind of finding in the chosen data. This is evident, I think, in the curious use of the pivotal category 'university graduate'. The formulation of the hypothesis which the data is taken to prove depends on keeping the category coarse-grained at the same time as it is implied that, due to more and more people enrolling for a degree and different degrees offered by a range of institutions, obtaining a university degree by itself has lost any strong tie to prestigious professions. It seems difficult to see any reason for articulating a thesis which, apart from being understood, depends not on the sharpness of the analytical tool but rather on its bluntness, other than as it being a clever way of, given the probable lack of further categorisations, making the most out of the available data.

Since the very idea of argument involves the existence of some controversy, token contrasts (whether to previous work, to the media, politicians or what is commonly believed) and the confirmation of known facts that make up an implied imaginary corpus lead to *token arguments*, positions being put forth as though they were contentious or as if they could only be seen to be connected to the piece of work in which they are being made. Moreover, verbs like ‘argue’, ‘suggest’, ‘claim’, ‘offer’ and ‘call for’ are either used in conjunction with propositions which are uncontentious or for which no backing is provided.

In **Article 7** Nadim writes ‘I argue that participation in paid work is not necessarily the same as breadwinning’ (2016: 121) when it is dubious whether anybody would dispute this point or whether it can be exclusively connected to what was shown in the article. And in **Article 12** Oakley ends her reflection on Interviewing Women by ‘offering’ – but ‘offering’ is really ‘mentioning’ and not developing or detailing – the concept of a gift and of seeing participants as donating, contributing to the research from the memories and stories of their lives.

A final kind of connection-making I would like to discuss is that relating to interview transcripts or excerpts from documents, which are usually the data on which the argument the research is making is based on. Needless to say that both types of text are valuable and potentially illuminating. Yet, neither are subjected to sensitive and cautious use, given the context in which they were produced and the possibilities of what might have been meant by their authors. Instead, they are subjugated to the *interpretative authority over words* that the sociologist claims, including the authority to treat each formulation as final or as telling the full story about what the speaker/writer believes, what they meant to say about whatever subject it can be seen to concern with no provision for potential explications or elaborations on what was intended.

A striking example is **Article 2** in which Smith and Riach employ the construct of ‘the employable citizen’ in order to show how moral boundaries are being raised via government and business-world texts and how potential testing and surveillance technologies may be legitimated. The claim is that there are limited understandings in ‘political texts’ and ultimately in UK anti-drug policy which make sense within a certain political framework and which may lead to socially oppressive results. It is held that this claim is based on an analysis of texts, which is a claim requiring that the authors ground their interpretation of the texts. The authors present a rather small selection of about fifteen sentences averaging two lines each from more than five different policy documents. They take issue with UK Home Office documents describing drug use in terms of social and economic costs, drawing distinctions between proper use of medical drugs and all other uses of non-medical drugs, and drug taking as limiting one’s ability to function properly. They also look at documents from the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (an association for human resource management professionals) and the Chartered Management Institute (an accredited professional institution for management). An excerpt taken from a document published by the latter is used to make the point that ‘harm and loss of control are invariably correlated with economic loss.’ The excerpt reads: ‘Drug



and alcohol misuse cannot only destroy the individual concerned, but can also have an extremely detrimental effect on the wider workforce, clients and customers and the organisation's performance'. (Smith and Riach 2016: 34) Given the modal 'can' it is possible to not see the sentence quoted as expressing any strong claim about a necessary outcome but only a weak claim about an only possible, though highly undesirable, correlation. That the correlation, if true, would indeed be undesirable for an organisation is not debatable. That it is probable in some cases is also, I think, uncontroversial. Therefore, it is possible to read the quoted sentence as expressing a rather reasonable and not an extreme neoliberal position. Finally, although there might be an argument to be made as to why employer interests are treated as dominant in a policy context, any objection regarding why organisations such as CIPD and CMI have the interests they do and why their focus is on economic performance is, I think, otiose. By virtue of the above, I am inclined to say that there is no strong connection between the argument provided and the document excerpts. The argument rather depends on what we could read in the documents based on what we know about neoliberal plans and corporate employee control.

This is a rather important point because it implies that, instead of the basis for establishing the claimed interpretive authority being textual, a fact which would require building up a case for an interpretation with arguments as to why a string of words needs to be read in a certain way as opposed to another, interpretative authority is presumed and grounded on an implied moral hierarchy. At the outset, the researcher is justified in treating the enemy, who is pinned down by a particular preconception of what they stand for, as textually docile on account of the researcher's own moral superiority.<sup>5</sup> It is this presumed superiority that makes for a particularly spurious connection between the researcher's argument and the analysed text.

## Conclusion

I have presented some deficient ways in which authors attempt to establish connections in sociological research articles. In summary, what I have claimed is that although research is commonly presented in the form of a contrast, the latter is less of an actual and more of a token one both with regard to views expressed by the government or media as well as relative to previous sociological research. Particularly with respect to the latter, this fact exposes as false the implication of an extant corpus of sociological studies and of well-documented knowledge. Moreover, in the absence of well-defined connections to a controversial issue and to logically appropriate support, presented arguments also become token rather than actual ones. The situation is, finally, compounded by authors not offering any support as to the correctness of an interpretation of textual data, relying instead on the researcher's presumed moral superiority so as to cement what is otherwise a loose way of construing textual meaning.

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<sup>5</sup> Needless to say that moral superiority can only be presumed in front of an audience of morally like-minded people.



In placing weight on what is problematic in these aspects of research I have quite deliberately departed from descriptive studies of sociological practice which would imply a focus on the methodical use of various procedures by authors in presenting an accountably competent piece of research. It is true that after decades, if not centuries, of methodological debate going around in circles, there is much to be said about treating sociological research practices naturalistically and it is, of course, the way in which ethnomethodological studies can showcase their contribution to the methodology of the social sciences. Still, I believe that there is something fundamentally the problem with the typical practices capable of producing an accountably competent piece of sociological research. In the present piece of work I have attempted to show that they are superficial in terms of the way they provide connections for that research and therefore detrimental for the reported research in more than one ways, not least in that the claims made fall considerably short of constituting well-formed arguments. More importantly, however, scrutinised practices are responsible for the lack of relevance to contemporary issues that many kinds of sociology would so fervently desire and, ultimately, for perpetuating disciplinary incoherence. If sociological research is to claim any connection to anything apart from its own instance, then practice will have to change.

Although this is easier said than done I would like to offer some final thoughts regarding the direction of change. The reason why these practices persist is, I believe, not to be located in the lack of ability of individual researchers, but within the fundamental assumptions of the game that sociologists envision themselves to be playing. Much of that game is tentative and uncertain regarding what it can yield, thus urgently longing for reassuring connections, however loose those may be. At a deeper level, however, the problem lies with what is not usually part of the game, which is precisely those aspects that could make for well-constructed connections. That is, most of the problems in connection-making practices have in fact to do with the sensibilities and abilities pertaining to understanding and doing interpretative justice to texts and arguments. Not only are these underdeveloped and buried a long way down the list of priorities but they are also, in some cases, held firmly at bay by the dominating self-righteousness of sociology. Their cultivation would mean sociologists would begin to exercise long-atrophied muscles which they have had no use for. In truth, doing so would probably not turn a thousand sociological islands into a continuous expanse of land. But it might transform them into a network connected via bridges both to each other and to the rest of the world.

#### **Appendix: Summaries by the author of articles published in *Sociology* 50(1), SAGE**

1. Klein, Markus. 2016. Educational Expansion, Occupational Closure and the Relation between Educational Attainment and Occupational Prestige over Time. *Sociology* 50(1): 3-23.

In the social mobility literature occupational attainment can be understood as class destination or as prestige (which are different and corresponding to Weber's

class-status group distinction). Prestige can be linked to educational qualifications differently than class destination, the latter being measured according to the Erikson-Goldthorpe-Portocarero (EGP) schema in terms of employment relations, which was explored in the author's previous work). Prestige is based on closure – professions being a case in point. Educational expansion meant that a smaller percentage of those who went to university could get into the professions, instead obtaining administrative, managerial, service positions or absorbed by public service.

Hypothesis: Declining association of variables of education and occupational prestige over time in Germany.

Advantages of choosing Germany are that the professions are closed to state-licensed graduates, educational expansion was weak and graduates end up in the salariat class – EGP I-II (including, apart from the professions, technical and managerial/administrative positions) which means that class destination is stable.

The scientific use files from annual cross-sectional surveys (*Microsensus*) are utilised covering 1976-2008. *Occupational prestige* is measured by subjective comparison to the standard of electricians which correlates with a status-by-closure scale. *Education* is measured on a 6 level scale, 3a being Polytechnics & Fachhochschule and 3b Universities.

Ordinary Least Squares regression of prestige on educational attainment analysis shows decrease in  $R^2$  (coefficient of determination) which could be explained by decreasing differences between graduates and other educational groups, increased residual spread within the graduate group, and general educational group changes in numbers and heterogeneity, a factor which is on balance ruled out.

The argument is bolstered by counterfactual analysis. If graduates are excluded that end up below the salariat class or if it is assumed that they all ended up within the salariat class the association still decreases. If the professions are excluded from the picture the association is stable.

The argument depends on the assumption that prestige hierarchies are invariable over time. It is recommended that the salariat class be further broken down into occupations in order to detect inequalities. Choice of degree and institution may also reproduce inequalities.

2. Smith, Charlotte and Riach, Kathleen. 2016. Drug Taking and Employment: Exploring the Employable Citizen in UK Policy. *Sociology* 50(1): 24-42.

Participation in economic life has become a key construct informing UK anti-drug policy. Therein, drug takers are portrayed as economically impotent, though this is simplistic, it is not based on evidence and it clashes with sociological understandings of drug-taking which are nuanced and conceptually sensitive and which, further, acknowledge that there are cases of work-related drug use as well as drug use being connected to concepts of enjoyment and pleasure. The above portrayal of drug taking is coupled to the assumption that work leads to autonomy and health. Thus, within neoliberal rationalities where drug-taking is assessed in economic terms, there is also a moral status afforded employment, drug-use is portrayed as out of control and at the same time unemployment is considered a matter of individual responsibility. Recognition is denied to substance users. In terms of sociological understanding '[w]e know little of how neoliberal-infused discourses close down subject positions surrounding ... substance use. (29)'

*The employable citizen* is an analytic construct summarizing the themes that appear in 14 'political' texts between 1995 and 2012. It captures the idea that selfhood is achieved only through economic participation and that finding employment is an issue for the individual.

Critical Discourse Analysis is used to provide for the fact that public texts are active vehicles of power, knowledge, legitimation, regulation. Key terms and their relation to other terms are investigated, distinctions and exceptions are made. The authors identify three 'strategies' that conjured up the employable citizen as a) *honourable*: involving the conflation of drug 'use' and 'misuse' and attachment of moral imperative via a they-we partition and images of economic loss and inefficiency, b) *in control, autonomous*: drug taking is portrayed as destructive, addictive, harmful, entails loss of control, constitutes a 'problem', constructs risk groups-underclasses, c) *redemptive*: work provides stability, normality, drug takers are not victims but moral outcasts and are responsible for their return to normality.

There is also a strong methodological point that the authors make about texts being efficacious and 'serv[ing] political discursive regimes... tranfrom[ing] and influenc[ing] organisational practice by simultaneously framing public problems and defining boundaries of responses to these problems, thus acting as self-referential points to justify intervention' (37).

3. Bagguley, Paul and Hussain, Yasmin. 2016. Negotiating Mobility: South Asian Women and Higher Education. *Sociology* 50(1): 43-59.

University attendance percentages of South Asian women have gone up dramatically since the 1970s, a development contrasting to stereotypical expectations. Social capital theories under which 'social capital' is understood as networks plus norms cannot explain the change. The idea of socialization into norms utilised therein is too static, it is ahistorical and it risks treating individuals as empty vessels without agency. The authors suggest that we need to look at the interactional dimension and the reflexivity of such women in the context of ethnicity, class, gender and religion. There emerges a complex picture involving resistance, negotiation of decision making and compromise.

The study includes women from Bangladeshi, Indian and Pakistani backgrounds and from Hindu, Muslim and Sikh religions and combines a quantitative component - which portrays the change (for the better) in GCSE/A-level performance and University Attendance of Asian women (although inequalities remain among Asian ethnicities and between them and White British) and the wider range of subjects applied to - with a qualitative component (interviews) which enables the authors to get at the various constraints and enablements in operation. *Communicative reflexivity* (discussing with others and seeking their confirmation of approval for one's actions) is associated with staying put and *meta-reflexivity* (reflecting on oneself and one's situations and being guided by living up to an ideal) with pursuing personal values.

Central issues women negotiate are where to study and what to study, being allowed or being able to afford leaving their home town and when to plan marriage. There is variation by type of reflexivity. It is stressed that women who are challenging parental and community pressure are not being individualistic; their commitment to mobility has a community element about it, it involves giving back to the community.

4. Mayblin, Lucy, Piekut, Aneta and Valentine, Gill. 2016. 'Other' Posts in 'Other' Places: Poland through a Postcolonial Lens? *Sociology* 50(1): 60-76.

Postcolonial theory can be fruitfully brought to bear on postsocialist states, former Soviet 'colonies', such as Poland. Some studies exist and are of two types ('comparative empire' and 'theoretical insights') but they are troubled by various issues in the application of the theory to novel cases, e.g. needing to settle whether socialism can be thought of as colonialism and Russia as a colonising power. Postcolonial theory can provide tools (concepts such as: orientalism, hybridity, time as space, project of 'modernity') which can account for the Eastern European experi-

ence and how the hegemonic discourse of enlightenment ('western core') operates within Europe, enhancing our understanding of Polish national identity and ideas of 'otherness'.

The study, which selected 30 participants for interviewing from a sample used for a previous representative survey, explores responses by Poles living in Warsaw toward encounters with *difference* at the level of life-history, urban life and at the national level and how these responses are aligned with narratives of modernity.

The responses are made sense of in terms of a *triple relation*, the parts of which operate in parallel and refer to Poland as:

a) *Colonised* by Russia: Russia is seen as the enemy, a threat, thus it serves as the glue holding Poles together who at the same time see it as less advanced, backward.

b) *Colonizer* in relation to third-world others – Borderlands are orientalised, Catholic Poland is seen as bulwark of Christendom, 'Ukrainians' are perceived as 'the other', while at the same time the country is an attractive destination for immigrants.

c) *Relation to Western Hegemons* – There operates a West – East (Slavdom) division, Poles adopt the discourse of conquerors in blaming themselves for the failures of the Polish state. Progress/social welfare persists as a Western ideal despite its crumbling in western states. Poland is an 'unwanted child' in the West but at the same time morally superior, unspoilt by processes of civilization.

The authors claim that '[t]he data presented in this article has clearly demonstrated the ways in which ordinary people draw on aspects of this triple relation in making sense on both Polishness and "otherness" in contemporary Poland' (73). The triple relation constitutes an analytic gain particularly with regard to understanding Polish national identity-racism, racialisation and anti-Semitism mediated by vision(s) of modernity.

5. Jenkins, Nicholas, Keyes, Sarah and Strange, Liz. 2016. Creating Vignettes of Early Onset Dementia: An Exercise in Public Sociology. *Sociology* 50(1): 77-92.

Four theatrical vignettes aimed at public sociology were produced after a theatrical workshop involving people with Early Onset Dementia (an umbrella term for a variety of conditions among which Alzheimer's, Huntington's and HIV-related neurological disorders) and their relatives, via a cooperation with the 'Strange

Theatre' company (following an Image Theatre methodology for bringing oppression into view). The vignettes are:

a) *Out of synch*: Dealing with management of time and memories, being able to keep up, confusion and disorientation.

b) *Flammable –handle with care*: Dealing with the handling of risk by carers and the potential threat self-worth.

c) *The phone (never) stops ringing*: Dealing with the danger of who might call when the patient is alone and with friends not getting in touch.

d) *We won't be invited back: Facework and management of faux pas*: Dealing with strategies of attributing *faux pas* to other factors – e.g. 'it's a man thing' and with avoidance behaviour by the patient.

Subsequently to the workshop there was a focus group in which mostly relatives responded as to the plausibility of the vignettes and how they relate to their own experience. The authors claim that vignettes have been used as *representations of experience* and as *symbolic snapshots*. There are also ethical issues of how to handle informed consent with dementia patients and issues relating to what counts as 'the data'. 'As research outputs, our vignettes... communic[ate] our findings in ways that further sociological understandings while also contributing to broader debates within civil society' (88).

There is a novelty factor claimed for sociologists using theatre. The main contribution, however, is to challenge 'individualism' in dementia ('uniqueness' which is used to justify neoliberal approaches – Department of health: Personalisation Agenda). Vignettes are a product of collective insight and their dissemination is a way to discuss oppression. The article ends with a connection to theoretical issues of how to conceptualise the self (trans-active multifaceted selves.) What is favoured is an 'inter-embodied' approach as proposed in an author's previous work.

6. MacLean, Sarah. 2016. Alcohol and the Constitution of Friendship for Young Adults. *Sociology* 50(1): 93-108.

In contrast to the epidemiological understandings of alcohol consumption as contagious, i.e. alcohol consumption levels spreading among friends, and to social science literature which understands sociality as contributing to the pleasure of alcohol consumption, this study shows alcohol as a means of friendship making

and affirming. This understanding is consequential as regards intervention to reduce alcohol-related harm.

Drinking builds intimacy, especially when levels of intoxication are similar. The presence of fear and vulnerability allow for the development of trust. Caring runs into problems of autonomy and responsibility but in different ways for men and women.

A sample of sixty (60) ethnically diverse drinkers aged 18-24, mostly students, were selected and were interviewed about their stories on a big night out in the Night Time Economy. Four friendship-making practices emerged:

a) *Producing and affirming intimacy*: Going for drinking together, sharing stories about previous drinking events, pre-drinking sessions, drinking enaction, 'keeping up' vs not doing so being seen as disrespectful, friends who do not drink being problematic.

b) *Demonstrating trust*: 'Risky' venues, vulnerability when drunk provide a setting for the reliance on friends

c) *Negotiating the parameters of a relationship*: Women form protective friendships, the commitment to stop each other from doing something they will regret is articulated and agreed to beforehand. With regard to men such a commitment is not explicitly stated.

d) *Providing care while managing tension between autonomy and responsibility*: Telling a friend to stop drinking while also resenting having to restrain someone. For men joining a fight versus stopping it.

Interventions to reduce alcohol-related harm need to work with rather than against friendship imperatives. Ultimately, interventions may need to rely on external controls on alcohol availability and prohibit sales of multiple drinks.

7. Nadim, Marjan. 2016. Undermining the Male Breadwinner Ideal? Understandings of Women's Paid Work among Second-Generation Immigrants in Norway. *Sociology* 50(1): 109 - 124.

While the Male Breadwinner *model* is in decline in the Western world, the *ideal* still governs understandings of women's employment. Women's paid work is accorded different meaning according to whether a) their economic contribution is recognised and b) a gender division ideal is upheld.



There is a need for updated studies of breadwinning from non-US, UK countries, focused not at ‘state-level policies, national cultural models or aggregated patterns ... in cross-national comparison ... [but] in the context of people’s everyday family lives’ (110). Norway is interesting because it is not known what second generation immigrants will do (will they reproduce traditional family practices?) and because there is a potential for tension due to a strong gender equality ideology. Pakistanis first migrated to Norway in the late 1960s. Among the second generation the dual earner model is the most common. Breadwinning, however, has to do with the meaning attributed to paid work, in this study’s case, in practices at the level of the family.

Nineteen (19) interviews were conducted, 14 with Norwegian-born women and 5 husbands. Of the 14 women, 9 married Pakistanis, the rest Norwegian-born Pakistanis. The interviews intended to capture the participant’s education, work and childcare choices and the explanations and justifications they offered.

Four distinct ideal-typical understandings are identified and positioned on a 2x2 matrix according to the combinations of the absence (-) or presence (+) of a) recognition of economic contribution, and b) gender equality ideal. Thus, women’s paid work is understood as:

Leisure activity (-,-)

Economic necessity (+,-)

Intrinsically rewarding (-,+)

Co-provision (+,+)

‘The interviewees do not adhere to fixed understandings of women’s work’ (120). Understandings are overlapping and conflicting in reality and whether and how they occur has to do with respondents’ class background, educational qualifications, family economic situation and cultural repertoires related to Islam and the Pakistani immigrant community.

The question ‘When is the male breadwinner ideal actually being challenged?’ is an important one for the author. ‘There seems to be more explicit challenge of the idea that women’s main responsibility is in the home, than of the idea that (only) men’s employment represents economic provision’ (122).

8. Dermott, Esther and Pomati, Marco. 2016. 'Good' Parenting Practices: How Important are Poverty, Education and Time Pressure? *Sociology* 50(1): 125 - 142.

Based on the 2012 UK Poverty and Social Exclusion (PSE) survey, this article focuses on parenting practices that have received political attention in the context of accusations of 'poor' parenting aimed at the poor set against a taken-for-granted benchmark of middle-class activities. It is noted that within the UK there has been since the 1980s a shift from structures to practices together with an individualised discourse to explain poverty and the idea of parenting as a solution to social problems.

There is very little quantitative work to assess what factors are in play in terms of parenting practices. The study did not look at 'how', only measured the frequency of practices related to:

*Education:* reading with a child and talking about reading, helping/talking about homework, attending parent's evenings.

*Leisure:* playing sports, games, watching TV.

*Eating:* having family meals.

The above practices were set against the following factors:

*Poverty:* subjective assessment coupled with criterion of < 60% of median income.

*Parental Education:* highest qualification obtained.

*Time pressure:* measured as in the original study by 10 statements to be agreed or disagreed with.

It is important to take child age into account as TV, games, sport are age-dependent. With the exception of TV and evening meals (in which they engage even more frequently) poor parents are as likely to engage in the range of parenting practices. Homework practices are more likely for educated parents, TV less likely (although they acknowledge that TV can be used differently – 'watch TV' is not enough).

It is argued that there is no clear evidence of a link between poverty and lack of appropriate parenting. According to the authors, the findings are especially relevant to the UK context and more broadly to the nature of contemporary parent-

ing, state intervention in the family and the dominance of a culture of intensive parenting. The article also connects to Mike Savage's call to study elites.

9. Roseneil, Sasha and Ketokivi, Kaisa. 2016. Relational Persons and Relational Processes: Developing the Notion of Relationality for the Sociology of Personal Life. *Sociology* 50(1): 143-159.

The Sociology of Personal Life has undergone a 'relational turn' but it should consider, in order to benefit from a stronger theorization of the *relational person* and *relational processes*, pragmatists such as Mead and Emirbayer and their process-oriented thinking as well as the figurational sociology of Elias and, lastly, psychoanalysis (object-relations, contemporary relational psychoanalyses and Ettinger's transsubjectivity).

The importance of significant others in 'personal life' (noted by Morgan, Smart, Mason, May) which is conceptualised as already social, has been used as a way of critiquing the individualization thesis. But it has gone too far. Personal experiences are psychosocial. There are three strands which allow the authors to 'challenge the idea that the notion of relationality is necessarily in opposition to a conceptualization of the individuality of the person' (146).

*Mead*: Apart from the 'me', the 'I' should be left in the equation to account for moments of creativity, intervention ('I' and 'me' are both different phases of the same self). The self is part of the world.

*Emirbayer*: A change in ontology from interactions between pre-existing entities to processes. Anti-categorical approach to relationality – do not specify in advance the nature of the relation.

*Figurational Sociology of Elias*: Apart from the conscious, cognitive and reflexive aspects of relationality, we also need to look at the affective. People's personal life intertwined through 'chains of interdependencies which are not informative about society but, more strongly, *are* society in that setting.'

*Psychoanalysis*: Emphasis on constitutive relations, matrix of mother/primary carer – child. Move from object-relations to subject-subject relations and intersubjectivity.

10. O'Toole, Therese, Meer, Nasar, DeHanas, Daniel Nilsson, Jones, Stephen H., and Modood, Tariq. 2016. Governing through Prevent? Regulation and Contested Practice in State–Muslim Engagement. *Sociology* 50(1): 160 - 177.

*Prevent*, a government anti-radicalisation programme ‘framed as a “hearts and minds” approach to countering al-Qaeda-inspired domestic terrorism’ (162), was originally launched in 2007 and relaunched in 2011 as explicitly separate from *Community Cohesion* policies. The characterisation of such state approaches in the literature as a form of discipline is incomplete without looking at how such approaches are implemented and received by civil society actors. The article demonstrates the contested nature of governing through *Prevent* by looking at relations between a) governance domains (equality and diversity policies – participatory welfare delivery – security and counterterrorism), b) local and national levels of governance, and c) the agency of Muslim actors.

There are indeed issues in the overlap of *Prevent* and community cohesion policies, the enmeshing of security and integration policies and the aim to increase state regulation of Muslim conduct. It is also correct to say that air-tight barriers between different parts of government cannot be constructed. But there are the following problems with the literature which conceives governance as a disciplinary mode of regulation as opposed to a contested practice:

- a) Textual analyses of stated government aims are not adequate without looking at the implementation practices.
- b) The coherence of governing strategies is not a given and should not be overemphasised.
- c) Governing power is seen to outweigh agency and does not do justice to the possibilities for changing formal rules.

Using an empirical basis of ‘[p]olicy analysis and 112 semi-structured interviews with government and Muslim civil society actors working at the national level and in three local case-study areas of Birmingham, Leicester and Tower Hamlets’ (161-2) the article attempts to answer the question: ‘what impact did the state’s engagement with Muslim through the prism of counterterrorism have on its engagement with Muslims more broadly?’ (162). The authors show how ‘Prevent was subject to contradictory and inconsistent logics and outcomes within government and encountered modification, challenge and resistance ... both from state actors at national and local levels and Muslim actors in/at governance areas’ (167).

In brief, there was a turf war between the Department for Communities and Local Government and the Office for Security and Counter Terrorism, both of which were initially involved in the delivery of *Prevent*. Local Authorities adjusted *Prevent* in terms of their local priorities, different for each locale, and Muslim Civil Society responses to community engagement developed through *Prevent* ranged from qualified cooperation to negotiation, refusal and exit.

11. Dyson, Simon M, Berghs, Maria, and Atkin, Karl. 2016. 'Talk to Me. There's Two of Us': Fathers and Sickle Cell Screening. *Sociology* 50(1): 178 - 194.

The article examines screening for Sickle Cell Disease, an inherited disease associated with resistance to malaria and 'black populations', and its genetic carrier status at antenatal clinics as a locus where men from racialised minorities produced 'family display' as a response to interactional and societal factors. Antenatal screening clinics are gendered spaces with an official audience and the potential for further surveillance (e.g. opportunistic HIV screening).

Twenty-four (24) fathers were recruited via NGO's and interviewed. Reported displays and displays for the interviewer were considered as data. During interviews fathers sought to clarify information, ensure improved services and seek moral reassurance.

The authors focus on two orientations by the fathers. The first is being there during antenatal care for the mother: father presence was seen as morally desirable, as part of being a good citizen (especially considering immigrant status) and potential absence was attributed to caring for other children or wife. The second is adopting the 'right' disposition, the correct way of comporting oneself: being teachable, passive and obedient

Reasons for display activities are further classed as oriented to the repair of either:

*Social relationships* (interactions to which people bring their biographies): cases of reconstituted partnership, geographical separation with the mother, planned or accidental pregnancy, understanding of or previous experience with SCD.

*Social relations* (contextual resources of class and racism, and institutional systems of health, education and the law): naturalness of screening for racialised subjects, racism and various stereotypes which led the fathers to distance themselves from superstitious practices and to present themselves closer to UK culture. The title quote, for example, refers to a case where a health professional stereotypes and discounts the father acting as if he was not there during mother care delivery.

The lack of father's commitment to SCD testing has been considered a policy problem but the authors did not find such lack. Contrary to such stereotypes and caricatures of fathers as lacking family commitment and they were engaged with their family and produced displays in response to the stereotyping. The scheme of relationships and relations is thus further utilised in the following way: 'we propose that display work becomes especially acute where the preferred social relationships fathers seek to constitute are ones not readily accommodated within extant social relations' (192).

The article ends with a theoretical point of display being different to performance/performativity.

12. Oakley, Ann. 2016. Interviewing Women Again: Power, Time and the Gift. *Sociology* 50(1): 195 - 213.

The article reflects on a piece of work Oakley published in 1981, entitled 'Interviewing women: a contradiction in terms?' based on a study about Becoming A Mother (BAM) (1974-1979) which was also followed by other publications. Oakley's 1981 article criticised textbook models for their implications on power and reciprocity in the researcher-researched relationship and responded with the concept of 'transition to friendship' based on 'sisterhood'. The article, however, also received criticism for attacking 'straw men' and overemphasising commonalities between women interviewers and interviewees. Oakley acknowledges the problems with that study and has moved on herself. The study, however, unintentionally came to occupy an important methodological place in constituting a way of doing feminist research as qualitative inquiry. Oakley herself does not share this orientation believing that 'any emancipatory social science needs also to embrace both quantitative and experimental methods' (199).

Reflection was prompted by a second study nearly forty years later, entitled Looking Back at BAM (LBBAM), which located some of the original respondents and aimed to recover their memories of the initial research along with the impact their participation had on their lives.

Oakley became very much involved in doing the interviews although she did not intend to at the beginning and encountered women who did not remember, others for whom looking back prompted reflection on their lives which they felt had turned out ok after all and others who had trouble thinking about the 37 years that had passed. Most felt it was a good thing to have taken part in the study and that it was helpful. Others were concerned with the publications that resulted from the study in terms of being able to recognise themselves despite anonymization, or in terms of the non-inclusion of some of their responses or dissatisfaction

with things they had said. Oakley is open about her own thoughts and feelings throughout.

It is claimed that there is a paucity of literature regarding the challenges of longitudinal qualitative research. Oakley ends by offering the concepts of gift and of participants donating, contributing from the memories and stories of their lives, along with a more critical concept of friendship. 'Feminist research', it is contended, cannot do justice to these kinds of relationships.

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